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Transformative Reading.
Linguistic Approaches to
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BOOK REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Book review of Olivia Fialho (2024). *Transformative Reading.* Linguistic Approaches to Literature Vol. 42. John Benjamins Publishing Company. Amsterdam/Philadelphia.

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Many, if not most, avid readers have experienced profound encounters with works of fiction or poetry that have left a lasting impact on them. In a study of the reading habits of 194 library users, Catherine Ross (1999) found that 60% reported that a particular book (in the majority of cases, fiction) had significantly helped them in their lives, typically describing the experience as a form of awakening that “offered an enlarged set of possibilities in their lives” (783–799). And yet, although it has always been a central premise in hermeneutics that “the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes *an experience that changes the person who experiences it*” (Gadamer 2003: 103), it is only in recent years, with the surge of interest in the affective dimension of reading (see e.g., Felski 2009) in aesthetic philosophy, neuropsychology and various forms of bibliotherapy, that scholars have begun to systematically research what may be termed *transformative reading experiences*. One of the difficulties facing researchers is that though such experiences are widespread, they occur only rarely and unpredictably. So how can we gain access to them?

Olivia Fialho’s ambitious new monograph *Transformative Reading* offers an extensive contribution to this challenging question. Starting out by cursorily referring to her own personal experience of “reading certain novels that have had profound and long-lasting effects on the sense of who I am in interactions with others in this world, such as *Candide* by Voltaire and *Olhai os Lirios dos Campos* by Erico Verissimo” (2–3) as the driving force behind her research, Fialho declares that “the primary objective of this book (is) to gain a deeper understanding of transformative reading experiences of the self” (185). How does she go about fulfilling this elusive goal? The book is divided into three parts, the first of which maps out the relevant theoretical terrain for her empirical study by drawing on advances in SE cognition and affect theory on the one hand, and by returning to Husserlian phenomenology, Formalism (the twin concepts of *foregrounding* and *dehabituation*) as well as Halliday’s linguistic concept of modalities, on the other. Fialho emphasizes that reading is an embodied, and (in line with Rosenblatt), transactional event. Although very technical and dense, this part constitutes a broad and relevant theoretical foundation. The opening chapter contains an historical overview of the divide between affective-experiential and interpretive-analytic approaches to literature. Although Fialho is right in stating that the affective dimension of reading until recently has been neglected in both pedagogy and scholarship, her otherwise extensive review leaves out some important recent research on experiential approaches or the existing literature on transformative aesthetic experiences (see e.g. Djikic et al. 2009; Tokaji 2003; Vessel et al. 2013).

Part II, *Tracking readers’s responses*, constitutes the core of Fialho’s study, as it presents the methodology, analysis and results of her empirical investigation. Here she explicates the development and elaboration of a particular interdisciplinary methodology, LEXNAP, a lexically based and numerically aided phenomenology. Fialho leans heavily on the work by Kuiken and Miall, who, through a combination of experimental studies and numerically-aided phenomenology, identified what they call “expressive enactment.” This is a “form of reading that penetrates and alters a reader’s understanding of everyday life” and that “modifies feeling, and reshapes the self” (Kuiken et al. 2004: 172). Their think-aloud and self-probed retrospection approach, in which readers mark striking passages when reading and subsequently comment upon them, is developed further by Fialho who in this laboratory study invites 48 participants to read Katherine Mansfield’s short story *Ms Brill*. This procedure is designed to capture the temporally unfolding *experience* of a text rather than its consummating *interpretation*. Fialho has adopted Kuiken and Miall’s method of gathering data, but expands their analytical framework by performing in-depth lexical analyses of readers’ accounts of their engagement, in which she marks progressive lexical shifts in the participants’ commentaries. Fialho defines the objective of her analysis as four-fold:

- 1) gain access to readers’ mode of engagement during the type of reading experience that is transformative, 2) focus on the moments in which changes in sense of self occur, 3) investigate the relation between textual properties and the experience of self-modification, and 4) propose a method that can allow for the observation of these processes. (20)

The results of Fialho’s ensuing cluster analysis reveal four distinct types of experiential accounts. These are: (1) External interpretive account of the narrative (marked by the reader’s distance and negative evaluation); (2) Protagonist-centred self-implication and ‘sympathetic pity for the

narrative' (marked by reader going from negative judgment to positive); (3) Situation-centred self-transformation and 'tough love' for the narrative (marked by self-realisations, experiencing text in positive way, and vivid imaginings of setting); (4) Protagonist-centred self-transformation and 'compassionate love' for the narrative (characterized by complex emotional engagement with both differential evaluation of characters and positive evaluation of language style). These clusters form the discorsal basis for Fialho's typology of four modes of engagement (External enactment, As-if enactment, Expressive enactment and Total enactment, respectively) and their linguistic markers. The typology of modes of engagement is clear and useful, with detailed descriptions of lexical characteristics, such a shift in deixis. As such, her claim that "the study of deixis can become a powerful tool in the description of reading experiences at the level of discourse" (193) is amply justified.

However, an unresolved issue remains regarding construct validity. Given Fialho's stated aim of investigating "how reading can be woven into the texture of readers' lives" through "describing the structure of the experience of transformative reading" (15), the reader may reasonably expect that transformation will be treated as a *psychological* construct. How can it be established that these accounts of reading engagements are in fact instances of *transformations of the self*? Although Fialho's method enables access to a reader's mode of engagement during reading, the claim that these reading experiences are transformative rests upon the inference that the lexical transformations of the constituents, the "recurrent meaning expressions across commentaries" (103), in fact reflect *psychological transformations* in the subjects. It is only in Chapter 5 that Fialho explicitly addresses the question of "what is a transformative experience of the self?" (90). On the one hand she says it can be deduced from tracing the reader's discourse about the text, by "focusing on feelings and perceptions that accompany such experience and that are concretely evident in readers' discourse" (90), but this presupposes a priori that the experience is transformative. So how does Fialho tie the *during* to the *after*? Her procedure is to measure the subjects' score on The Experiencing Questionnaire (developed by Kuiken, Campbell & Sopcak 2012), specifically the two subscales of *self-perceptual depth*, on the grounds that it allows her "to observe how experiencers achieve deepened understandings and realize possible commitments to enduring truths" (as it consists of items such as 'after reading this story, I felt sensitive to aspects of my life that I usually ignore', 'I felt like changing the way I live', 'my sense of life seemed less superficial'). There are two possible shortcomings related to this method. Firstly, the analysis cannot uncover whether the statements reflect lasting or merely temporary effects. Secondly, it looks at *average scores*, which show that cluster 4 (and partly also cluster 2) correlate with higher scores on self-perceptual depth. But the analysis does not investigate any *particular* participant's reading experience and the impact it has had. As such, whether the reading experiences studied can justifiably be called transformative is incompletely resolved, however accurate the analysis of *lexical transformations*.

The third part, *Applications and future directions*, seems the least developed portion of the book. It deals with two very important questions: how can one build on the methodology and findings of the study to learn more about transformations of self, and how may this knowledge be applied in educational settings? Regarding the first question, Fialho states that future research must investigate "what it is exactly in the text that causes the particular effects." However, given the emphasis in Part One on the transactional nature of reading, such a study of text-inherent properties would constitute a departure from her theoretical foundation. One possible expansion of the LEXNAP would perhaps be to include pre-/post-measures of a reader's self-state, thus building on the first inquiry into "existential change occasioned by reading" made by the phenomenological psychologist Paul F. Colaizzi (1978), who found that self-changing reading experiences are structured into three temporal phases: *before* the reading commences ("readiness"); *during* the act of reading ("revealing power of the book") and the *after-effects* of the reading ("consequences") (60). As for the practical applications of this empirical-theoretical study, Fialho has made crucial steps in this direction by developing an educational program called The Transformative Reading Program. This may potentially be of great pedagogical relevance, but it is difficult to assess its real value as more information would be required for readers to gain a sufficient grasp of what such a program entails or how it could be implemented. Hopefully that will be the subject of a future book.

Although the book could have provided more insight into actual embodied readers and how their experiences of *Ms Brill* have changed their selfhood, for scholars and students interested in learning about different modes of enactment, and how they manifest themselves in the discursive constituents of the participant's accounts, this study provides a useful typology and insightful in-depth explorations of the lexical transformations in participants' accounts. The book will be of value to anyone interested in how to combine quantitative (cluster analysis) and qualitative (interview) methods for studying the reading experience. It will be of greatest benefit to researchers who already have a grasp of phenomenology and cognitivist approaches, and who wish to learn more about how to perform lexical and numerical analysis of readers' phenomenological accounts of their experiences.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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